

O'Dea (Jas. J.)

THE  
DEVELOPMENT  
OF  
RELIGIOUS IDEAS.

Box 10,

BY  
JAMES J. O'DEA, M. D

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THE

## DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS.

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AVAILING ourselves of Mr. Tylor's recent learned and elaborate work on "Primitive Culture," we will attempt, in the following pages, a brief sketch of the development of religious ideas.

As all, or nearly all, the testimony to be adduced in support of our view of this subject is taken from contemporary savage life as observed and described by intelligent travellers, its claim to consideration needs to be established before we can proceed in our argument.

What ground is there, then, for assuming that the religious beliefs of contemporaneous savages represent the religious condition of primitive man?

Science, supplemented by history, shows a march of central parts of the globe forward from the savage toward the civilized state. The progress here meant is a fact amply verified by geology and archæology, for both testify to the successive ages through which, from the drift (Palæolithic) epoch to the iron age, the portion of the human race now referred to has passed to its present condition. But, from man's known intellectual and material progress, it is fair to infer his religious

progress also, since, as a matter of general experience, both go hand-in-hand, and since it is not a probable hypothesis that savage or barbarous man can be in possession of a system of natural religion, of indigenous growth, in advance of his natural state. Now, travellers point to outlying peoples still in a savage, barbarous, or at least stationary condition. Why are they so? Because, as a rule, they are too remote from the centre of activity to be influenced thereby. They are prototypes—with some allowance of course for such slight advances as they themselves have made—of the primitive intellectual and social state of civilized man; but, if of his primitive social and intellectual state, consequently of his religious condition also. Therefore, we may employ reliable testimony as to the state of belief among contemporary savages, to illustrate the religious condition of prehistoric nations, with a view to showing that out of this latter many of our most important religious conceptions have been developed.

As regards its origin, the subject of religious belief may be considered from two points of view: either as a revelation from God—using the term revelation in its common sense—or as a continuous development out of the primitive conceptions, needs, and experiences of man. The former is the opinion of theologians; but the latter, fruitful of important results in the hands of ethnographers, is that which we shall trace in this paper.

The chief interest of the whole discussion centres around the true origin and development of the idea of God. The theological position on the subject, early taken up, has been pretty closely adhered to. It is to the effect that God made a direct original revelation of Himself to man, and that the image so produced has been perpetuated in the minds of all subsequent generations, blurred and defaced, to be sure, by sin and faithlessness, yet only needing renewal by accident or reflection to be represented in consciousness in unmistakable reality. But, that there are peoples who have no notion of God, and seem never to have had any, there is ample testimony to prove. Father Dobritzhofer, a zealous Roman Catholic missionary, states the theological view, and his own experience



of its untenableness, in the following words: "Theologians agree in denying that any man in possession of his reason can, without a crime, remain ignorant of God for any length of time. This opinion I warmly defended in the University of Cordova, where I finished the four-years' course of theology begun at Gratz in Styria. But what was my astonishment, when, on removing thence to a colony of Albipones, I found that the whole language of these savages does not contain a single word which expresses God or Divinity! To instruct them in religion it was necessary to borrow the Spanish word for God, and insert in the Catechism "*Dios ecnam coagerick*," "God the Creator of all things."<sup>1</sup> Father Baegert, for seventeen years a missionary among the Indians of California, affirms that "idols, temples, religious worship, or ceremonies, were unknown to them, and they neither believed in the true and only God nor adored false deities."<sup>2</sup> Colden says the five great nations of Canada had no word for God. Examples have been adduced, it is true, "to show," as Mr. Tylor says, "that monotheism underlies the native creeds of North America," but they are unreliable, owing to the impossibility of discriminating, without a more critical examination than they have yet received, between what is indigenous to them and what they owe to Christian sources.

A reverse view of the question has been urged of late days by excellent authority, and supported by an ample array of facts. This view holds that belief in a *Supreme personal God* is attained only by ages of slow growth in culture, and after the human mind has passed through well-known stages of intellectual improvement and expanding religious conceptions. It holds that as man has had to toil slowly on the road from barbarism to civilization, so, with equal slowness and labor, he has progressed from the lowest forms of superstition to the most sublime religious conceptions. As we find relics of barbarian laws and customs surviving even to the present day, so we meet with strange features in our religious system, which, when traced back to their origin, are discovered to be

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Sir J. Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times*, second edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

links of the chain connecting us with the rude spiritual conceptions of remote ages. Many of these features are preserved in tradition and folk-lore. They crop up too in daily life, reminding us of a time when they doubtless fully expressed the faith of our ancestors.

But this progress points also to a something without which it could not have been, to a basis in human nature on which, if not out of it, religious belief has thus slowly developed. The various ethnic religions of the world are not the product either of priestly cunning or of political ambition. But they are the product of man's intellectual and moral wants, of a need which he feels and has always felt of something to satisfy his mental and spiritual cravings. In so far as modern research declares for this basis, it is treading on firm ground; but by rejecting it, as there are some indications of an attempt to do, it will cut itself off from the only rational explanation that can be offered of the existence of religious ideas. It seems to us, therefore, that all precise treatment of this subject must assume as a fact the existence of a religious element in man's nature, out of which the beliefs characteristic of his religious progress are evolved. With regard to the nature of this element, we can only say that it is an intuition by which outward facts are apprehended in their religious light, i. e., in their relations to the mysterious problems of final causation and human destiny.

Mr. Tylor commences his discussion of animism by asking whether there are or ever have been "tribes of men so low in culture as to have no religious conceptions whatever?" The right answer to this question will, of course, depend on what we mean by religious conceptions. If we intend thereby such religious ideas as obtain among civilized races, we make a serious mistake, and yet this is the very sense in which travelers and some able advocates of the theory of development have understood the expression. Sir J. Lubbock, thus limiting the scope and meaning of religion, and insisting that the lowest grade of his idea of it is higher than its actual state as observed among certain savages, declares: "If the mere sensation of fear, and the recognition that there are probably other



beings more powerful than man, are sufficient alone to constitute a religion, then we must, I think, admit that religion is general to the human race.”<sup>1</sup> But, by refusing to acknowledge this as a stage of religion, it is easy for him to conclude, to his own satisfaction at least, that religion is not universal. If this be religion, “we must admit,” he writes, “that the feeling of a dog or a horse toward its master is of the same character; and the baying of a dog to the moon is as much an act of worship as some ceremonies which have been so described by travellers.”<sup>2</sup> The radical defect in this line of reasoning lies in the conventional meaning which Sir J. Lubbock and those who agree with him attach to the word religion. They forget that it has a more exalted signification with them than it can have among savages. They make the belief and worship of civilized communities the standard by which they judge the claims of all savage religions to recognition. This, however, is not a tenable position, and, in fact, it is disproved by examples which might be taken from their own works to show a comparatively elaborate system of belief among savages whom they would yet declare to live in a non-religious state. For instance, Dr. Lang,<sup>3</sup> after asserting of the Australians that “they have no religion or religious observances to distinguish them from the beasts that perish,” yet records that they believe small-pox to be caused by *Budyah*, a malicious spirit, and that in robbing a wild beehive they leave some of the honey for an offering to their god *Buddai*. Notwithstanding, therefore, the great deference which is due to the opinion of Sir J. Lubbock, we cannot help thinking that however degraded some savage beliefs and systems of worship may be, they are certainly more worthy of the name religion than “the baying of a dog to the moon.”

We may characterize the first stage of religious belief as superstitious in the extreme, i. e., as accounting for all phenomena, subjective as well as objective, on the hypothesis of the existence and intervention of supernatural beings. Not a leaf stirred nor a spring bubbled, not a breeze sighed nor a

<sup>1</sup> Sir J. Lubbock, *Origin of Civilization*, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Queensland, p. 340; quoted from Tylor's *Primitive Culture*.

tempest roared, but as the several acts or manifestations of spirits residing in tree, water, wind, and cloud. The very atmosphere men breathed was thick with them. Certain acts, as yawning, were restrained by this belief, for it was feared lest, in a moment of unguarded indulgence, evil spirits might gain unwelcome admission into the body. Spirits were believed to preside over all the chief events of life—birth, marriage and death, for example—and also as special guardians to keep watch over the conduct and fortunes of individuals and families. Many incidents in the life of the individual, as sickness, dreams, visions, and presentiments, were explained on the same belief. Man was everywhere the sport of invisible beings, who dealt out to him good or evil according to their own inclination. Surrounded, hemmed in by this invisible world of spirits who visited upon him, as he would gather from his hard lot, chiefly anxiety and privation, it is natural to picture him instinctively assuming an attitude of watchful suspicion toward them. But, discovering, after many failures, the impossibility of defending himself against foes so unassailable, he would change his tactics—he would adopt the cunning expedient of endeavoring to appease their enmity by offerings and supplications. Hence the general primitive custom of gifts and sacrifices. Mr. Tylor gives a different explanation of the origin of these religious rites; but, in our opinion, it is more properly applicable to a higher stage of animism.<sup>1</sup> Theologians have drawn from the custom of sacrificing proofs of man's intuitive sense of his own unworthiness, of his sinfulness, and of his need of a means of reconciling himself with an offended Deity.<sup>2</sup> But, taken at its true value, for what it indicates irrespective of strained interpretation, it only explains the savage idea of the causes of natural evil, and what remedies were believed most effectual in averting it. To infer from his paralyzing dread of unseen agencies a sense in him of estrangement from the Deity by sin, or, from the custom of sacrificing, his yearning for a restoration of the lost union, is to credit

<sup>1</sup> See his article on the Religion of Savages, *Fortnightly Review*, August 15, 1866.

<sup>2</sup> See Dr. Newman's Essay in aid of a Grammar of Assent.



him with conceptions far in advance of his condition. "The religious theories of savages," writes Sir J. Lubbock, "are certainly not the result of deep thought, nor must they be regarded as constituting any elaborate or continuous theory."

The primitive belief thus referred to has been named by Mr. Tylor *animism*, or the doctrine of spiritual beings. They are classified as—*a*. Souls of men, animals, plants, and inanimate things; *b*. Active, intelligent spirits, dwelling outside of matter.

Primitive man believed, as do the savages of to-day, that all objects had souls. But, besides, there were extra-terrestrial spirits, who determined natural manifestations by direct interposition. All the affairs of life were in their hands, from the most trivial to the most important, from the most common to the most unusual. They were deemed the causes of events, the guides of their course, and the influencers of their issue. They were sympathetic spectators of human actions, feeling pain or pleasure according to their ideas of right and wrong, and, at their arbitrary will, visiting man with the consequences of their friendship or enmity.

In tracing the sources and development of this system of belief two facts will, we trust, be established:

1. That its roots lie in the spiritual needs of man, and that its growth keeps pace with his psychical development.

2. That it is the germ of all more developed ethnic religions. Hence our inquiry will follow the line indicated by the following questions: How did this system of belief originate, or out of what facts and experiences in human nature was it evolved? What other beliefs does it lead to in the course of its natural growth and development?

Directly the savage had attained to powers of observation and reasoning, certain recurring experiences, engaging his attention, would cause him to speculate on their origin and meaning. For example, he would dream. Scenes near and far, friends living and dead would visit him in the silent hour, converse with, and even impart to him hints and warnings which, if filled out by subsequent experience, would seem prophetic. Reflecting on these experiences, he would hit on



an explanation, which, as his first essay at a philosophy of things, might be the beginning of all his truer and nobler religious conceptions. And this explanation itself would proceed from the fact that primitive man attaches an equal degree of credence to his subjective as to his objective experiences. The subjective state called dreaming is to him a real world wherein he actually passes through his dream-experiences. An amusing example of this belief is given by Sir J. Lubbock in his recent work on the "Origin of Civilization." A North-American Indian dreamt he was taken captive. On awaking, so strongly was he impressed with the reality of what had been passing through his mind, that he urged "his friends to make a mock attack on him, to bind him, and treat him as a captive, actually submitting to a considerable amount of torture, in the hope to fulfil his dream." Now, dreams are explained on the hypothesis that something in the dreamer, not subject to the conditions of matter, went out from him as he slept. Hence, he necessarily makes a distinction between matter and spirit, and learns at the same time that he is composed of both. The following examples will show the existence of this belief, and at the same time place it in a stronger light :

Cranz remarks of certain Greenlanders that they believe "the soul quits the body in the night, and goes out hunting, dancing, and visiting; their dreams, which are frequent and lively, having brought them to this opinion. Among the Indians of North America, we hear of the dreamer's soul leaving his body, and wandering in quest of things attractive to it. . . . The New-Zealanders considered the dreaming soul to leave the body and return, even travelling to the region of the dead to hold converse with its friends. . . . The Tagals of Luzon object to waking a sleeper, on account of the absence of his soul. The Zulu may be visited in a dream by the shade of an ancestor, the *itongo*, who comes to warn him of danger, or he may himself be taken by the *itongo* in a dream to visit his distant people."<sup>1</sup>

But what of the world of his dreams? Is it not a real world, and are not the spirits peopling it realities also? Yes,

<sup>1</sup> Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, vol. i., p. 397, *et seq.*

he has seen the one even to many of its minute details, and both seen and conversed with the other. To this world his soul went on its night excursion, and there held intercourse with its ghostly inhabitants while his body lay wrapped in sleep. Thus, faith in the objective reality of dreams would lead to belief in a soul, in extra-mundane spirits, and in a world beyond the grave. Death also, and other conditions intermediate between life and death, would afford further proof of the same truths. Savages had observed the respiration of men and animals. On cold, raw days they could see the breath issue as a white smoke from the mouth and nostrils. This breath was the soul or spirit, and its possession made all the difference between life and death. Men died because this breath left them—"died from loss of breath" is still among children a smart way of accounting for dissolution. There were those who could testify to having seen the spirit take flight at the last moment, and others who could tell of the visits they had received from the souls of the departed. They came in dreams, sometimes in a loving, at other times in an angry and revengeful mood. When one of the Basutos of Africa is haunted by the apparition of a deceased relative, he sacrifices a victim on his tomb to appease him. So also sickness was occasioned either by a temporary loss of the soul or by the invasion of an evil spirit. Recovery only took place when the soul, returning, resumed its old seat and function, or when the evil spirit was exorcised. Consequently the primitive art of healing consisted in efforts on the part of the sorcerer or medicine-man to restore this lost connection with all possible speed, or to expel the intruder. "When a Chinese is at the point of death, and his soul is supposed to be already out of his body, a relative may be seen holding up the patient's coat on a long bamboo, to which a white cock is often fastened, while a Tanist priest by incantations brings the departed spirit into the coat, in order to put it back into the sick man. If the bamboo after a time turns round slowly in the holder's hands, this shows that the spirit is inside the garment"<sup>1</sup> and of course may be restored to the sufferer.

<sup>1</sup> Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, vol. i., pp. 395, 396.

The nature and attributes of the soul next become a subject of speculation and study. Various will be the questions concerning its nature, its existence out of the body, its abode and state after death. At first there will be a belief in its materiality; for, was it not evident to some of the senses? The eye could take in its form and the ear its small, chirping voice. Various customs survive to illustrate this phase of belief. Apertures are made in new graves for souls to escape through to the world beyond. The Chinese make a hole in the roofs of their dwellings for the same purpose. Savages shout and beat with sticks to scare ghosts away. They flourish a handful of twigs over the head of a widow to "drive off her husband's ghost, and leave her free to marry again." We are told by Mr. Tylor that "Congo negroes abstain for a whole year after a death from sweeping the house, lest the dust should injure the delicate substance of the ghost;" and that, even to the present day, the German peasant fears to slam a door, lest he should pinch a soul in it! Thus, the modern conception of the soul as an immaterial principle is seen to be foreign to the savage mind.

Again, the question of the existence of the soul apart from the body will also have its phases of progress. At first it will be regarded as conterminous with the body, living and dying with it, or, if not then dying, surviving only for the short time which it spends around familiar scenes of earth. But its matter is of a subtler kind, and, though subject to the law of death, it is capable of resisting it longer. The old dead are dead indeed, but the lately-mourned are still near by. "Ask the negro," says Du Chaillu, "where is the spirit of his great-grandfather, he says he does not know; it is done. Ask him about the spirit of his father or brother who died yesterday, then he is full of fear and terror; he believes it to be generally near the place where the body has been buried, and among many tribes the village is removed immediately after the death of one of the inhabitants."

At every step in the study of primitive conceptions of the soul, hints crop up which gradually expand into more or less precise statements regarding a future place of existence. A belief in such a place would necessarily follow from the notion



of a spirit leaving the body. Its full development could not be attained, however, until the soul was no longer regarded as mortal and material. The growth of the notion of eternal duration in a future life would keep pace with the progress of belief concerning the spirit, until it had reached its final stage in the correlative conceptions of immortality and infinity in time. Various incidental facts would aid this progress, as the transmission of the worship of particular deities from generation to generation, a custom which would itself accompany the gradual accretion of families, and houses, and tribes, to form the commonwealth.

The same process of development may be traced in primitive ideas regarding the dwelling-place of departed spirits. By some savage tribes this is believed to be on the earth, in various places difficult of access, among mountains, valleys, and remote islands. In North-American-Indian tradition, the Bridge of the Dead is a passage-way prepared for souls on their journey to the future land in the West. Catlin describes it as a long and slippery pine-log, with bark stripped off, stretched from hill to hill across a deep ravine, at the bottom of which flows a swift stream. Over this dangerous road the spirits of the dead must pass on their way to the delightful hunting-grounds.

The condition of souls in the future state is a reflection of what it was on earth, even so much as their social grade and individual peculiarities being there faithfully reproduced. This includes a belief that the accidents and mutilations of the body are reproduced in the soul. The aborigines of Brazil believed that the soul "arrived in the other world wounded or hacked to pieces," according to the lot of the body in this life. "The Australian who has slain his enemy will cut off the right thumb of the corpse, so that, although the spirit will become a hostile ghost, it cannot throw with its mutilated hand the shadowy spear, and may be safely left to wander, malignant but harmless."<sup>1</sup>

But, as the sense of the mystery surrounding the future life deepens in the savage mind, the habitation of souls will be placed farther and still farther away. Accordingly, though

<sup>1</sup> Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, vol. i., p 407.

at first, perhaps, entirely limited to the immediate neighborhood of the earth, their abode is afterward transferred to some distance, generally across the ocean, in the direction of the setting sun, where, according to the vision of the Algonquin chief, there is neither cold, nor war, nor bloodshed, "but the creatures run happily about, nourished by the air they breathe." England, Mr. Tylor tells us, was one of the sea-girt lands chosen for this purpose. Thither souls of the dead were conveyed in shadowy boats by spirit-fishermen, from the bleak North-German coast.

Hades is another and more distant bourne of departed souls. Its situation is sometimes in the interior of the earth, in caverns, having openings of communication with the living world; sometimes beneath the earth, in a world which this planet, then considered flat, was supposed to overlie. The author of "The Coming Race" did not violate ancient tradition, how much soever he may have offended the æsthetic sense, in placing his newly-discovered society in the bowels of the earth. The imagination of savage man had long ago bodied forth such a state of existence, and the popular belief in it had survived into classic times, running through the poetry of the ancients from Hesiod to Virgil. The Samoan islanders believe that, when one of their number dies, "the host of spirits that surround the house, waiting to convey his soul away, set out with him, crossing the land and swimming the sea, to the entrance of the spirit world. This is at the westernmost point of the westernmost island, Savaii, and there one may see the two circular holes or basins where souls descend, chiefs by the bigger, and plebeians by the smaller, into the regions of the under world."<sup>1</sup>

The visible firmament, with its apparent limits, its depth of blue, and its wonderful luminous bodies, has been a chosen place of souls from the remotest times. Its floor was a solid arch enclosing the earth; in it were set the stars, and above it disported the beatified souls of men. The North-American Winnebagos had a beautiful tradition, that the "Milky Way" was the path of souls in heaven. The modern Iroquois pictures the departed spirit going ever upward, till it glides out

on the plains of paradise, "where it sees people, trees, and other objects, as on earth."

As Mr. Tylor observes in the work we are making frequent reference to in this article, the fate of these various traditions has not been uniform. Belief in the earth as the abode of souls is confined to the savage state; that in hades, or the interior or underpart of the earth, survives to the present, and retains a firm hold on the Christian world; that in heaven, or a place above the firmament, faintly indicated in the savage state, grows stronger as we approach to barbarism, and predominates in civilization.

Thus the beliefs respecting the survival of the soul and a future state are found intimately associated both in conception and development. Their progress is so simultaneous that it is impossible to study one apart from the other.

The following summary will present what we have already said on this part of the subject, in a comprehensive form :

1. The existence of a tribe or nation void of any religious conceptions, though not impossible, is unknown. The first phase of religious belief is, probably, animistic and spiritualistic.

2. Souls and spirits have at first only a limited existence in time after the death of the body.

3. A distinction is at length drawn between the spirits of good or great men and of the common herd. The former are declared immortal; they have a place assigned them in the spirit-world. The latter are mortal, perishing out of existence and the memory of man. According to Feejeean belief, few spirits live forever, because so few have powers of attaining to immortality. This notion is sometimes expanded into a belief even in future retribution, as where Catlin informs us that the good walk safely over the log-bridge (already described) to the hunting-grounds, while the wicked, trying to dodge the stones thrown at them by the six persons on the far side of the ravine, fall and are dashed to pieces on the rocks beneath. The barbarian Celts had a heaven for their gods and heroes, but the spirits of inferior men were localized in streams, trees, groves, and caves. Pagan Rome had Olympus for her gods, and Elysian fields for the common people who had lived justly. To these we may add :



4. Finally, all distinctions of souls founded on rank or ability are practically annulled. Heaven, ruled by one Supreme Person, but still peopled by a hierarchy conceived on the social and political orders familiar to pagan imperial Rome and early Christianity, is declared the common heritage for which all may strive.

What we have said so far concerning the doctrine of souls is only a part of the more comprehensive scheme of man's life here and destiny hereafter. There remains for consideration an equally large part of the sum of human belief relating to spirits independent of man, and, in primitive times at least, believed to be the unseen causes of natural phenomena. This part of the subject has been already incidentally referred to in the early part of this paper; now, however, it has claims to more particular attention, arising partly out of its own intrinsic interest, but chiefly because it presents the elements of all higher religious conceptions, and indicates the first gropings of the human mind after a Divine Providence. Long before the great historic religions were conceived about which so much information has been given us lately, ages anterior to the call of Abraham, to the dispersion of the Semitic, Aryan, or Turanian races, to the worship of *El*, or *Dyaus pitar*, or *Tien*, the early inhabitants of the world had a religion of spirits, relics of which survive to the present day. At least this is certain of the Turanian branch of the human family, and there is every probability that the same is equally true of the other two. All over the vast region of Northern and Central Asia this worship of spirits prevailed, at one time doubtless in its simplicity, though now in great part replaced by more elaborate religious institutions. Two at least of the great divisions of the human family, the Semitic and Aryan, have outgrown this primitive form of belief, but it still constitutes a great part of the religion of Turanian peoples, as Finns, Lapps, Samoieds, and even Chinese, and may be viewed in almost original purity among the Australian and Indian aborigines of the present day. Now, the key to this otherwise inexplicable religion is the animism on which we have all along been dilating. And the origin of animism itself is referable to primitive attempts at explaining the causes and meaning of

things. When primeval man saw or felt motion, heard sounds, smelt odors, he inferred life in the substances from which proceeded that which causes these phenomena of consciousness. Afterward life suggested spirit. A conclusion is soon arrived at that, as the soul is the cause of the phenomena of life in man, so a spirit is the cause of motion, sound, and odor, in the object-world. Every material thing, whether animate or inanimate, would at length be embraced in this belief, and stocks and stones would share religious honors with men and the moving individuals of flood and field. But religious belief is lifeless without action. From the time it assumes a distinct shape in the mind of man it is embodied in an outward form corresponding with its inward character, and hence the origin of worship. We might have illustrated this truth at some length under the preceding section, had space permitted, by reference to the practice of *manes*-worship so common as to be met with in nearly every part of the world. Here, however, we will regard it under the aspect of fetichism.

Fetichism is a branch of its parent-tree, animism. It is at once a theory and a practice, embodying both a primitive philosophy of causation and a more or less definite form of religious worship. In this double capacity, therefore, it has both a theoretical and a practical side. In so far as it is theoretical it may be viewed as an effort to explain the causes of phenomena on the supernatural hypothesis. "Some explanation of the phenomena of life," says Mr. J. F. McLennan, "a man *must* feign for himself; and, to judge from the universality of it, the simplest hypothesis, and the first to occur to men, seems to have been that natural phenomena are ascribable to the presence in animals, plants, and things, and in the forces of Nature, of such spirits prompting to action as men are conscious they themselves possess. So far as we know, this has been at some time or other the faith of all the races of men; and again, so far as we know, it is a faith that has nowhere been given up as unsatisfactory otherwise than gradually on its being perceived, from case to case, that the behavior of the forces of Nature and of the bodies they act upon is not

wayward or wilful, but conformable to law ; and until the law has been ascertained.”<sup>1</sup>

We feel inclined to insist all the more on the practical or religious character of fetichism, inasmuch as an eminent authority on the subject, Sir J. Lubbock, has expressed it as his opinion that, because, for instance, “the negro believes that by means of the fetich he can control his deity,” it is essentially antireligious. It is just by his efforts to control the fetich in his own interest that the savage expresses his notions of religion. He believes that, by offerings, prayers, and supplications, he can induce his fetich to share his feelings, and further his schemes. This is, very likely, a perversion of religious practice to selfish ends, but yet it is far more excusable in him than in the Christian, and yet we do not commonly regard the repeated attempts of Christian communities to get God on opposite sides of a quarrel as antireligious.

Furthermore, on its practical side, fetichism is a means of arriving at a conception of the object of worship, for without some tolerably distinct image of such it could have no hold on the loyalty or affection of the human heart. As the late Mr. Mansell puts the idea, “Concepts, to be realized in consciousness, require to be individualized in an image. Without the application of this test we should not be able to distinguish between the conceivable and the inconceivable;”<sup>2</sup> and, of course, we cannot worship what we cannot conceive. We see in the worship of fetiches, therefore, an effort, unaware of its philosophy likely, to realize in consciousness the concept of a spirit by individualizing it in an image. This latter would be at first some rude natural object, as a stick or a stone, but, with the progress of culture and æsthetic art, elaborated representations would be substituted, and at length, very much through the influence of these agents, fetichism would develop into anthropomorphism and idolatry. The practical aim of the fetich-worshipper is analogous to that which modern foresight seeks to effect through scientific knowledge and inventive skill. The disciple of Franklin erects a lightning-rod to

The Worship of Animals and Plants. Fortnightly Review, October 1, 1869.

Metaphysics, p. 36, American edition.



save his house and family from destruction by lightning. Similarly the savage endeavors through his fetich to control the forces of Nature in the interest of his own success and safety.

Our information regarding fetichism is still incomplete, owing partly to the difficulty of entering wholly into the spirit of so peculiar a custom, but chiefly to the unwillingness of savages to explain the nature of their faith and practices. Hence we may not know the precise character under which the fetich is at all times worshipped. On this point Mr. Tylor remarks: "As to the lower races, were evidence more plentiful as to the exact meaning they attach to objects which they treat with mysterious respect, it would very likely appear, more often and more certainly than it does now, that these objects seem to them connected with the action of spirits, so as to be, in the strict sense" (of the word fetich), "real fetiches." Some are doubtless worshipped as the embodiments of a spirit, and these are pure fetiches, but others may be regarded as in some mysterious way symbols or representatives of supernatural powers, and in this case they are evidences of a passage from fetichism into idolatry. But, furthermore, objects may be worshipped as fetiches because they, or their spirit, possess some exceptional quality which they can communicate to mortals. Without this latter information we would be at a loss to account for the reverence savages pay to ornaments and various objects, the very opposite to ornamental in civilized eyes, which they wear on the person. The Caribs treasured up the old bones of some of their dead, believing them to possess miraculous properties. Quartz and other minerals were objects of terror to the savage, because they held spirits able to inflict sickness and death.

To sum up what we have said on this part of the subject, fetichism may be regarded as having three stages of progress: In the first, objects are worshipped as having souls. In the earliest stage of religious belief every thing, whether animate or inanimate, has a soul. The friends of the dead warrior bury his bow and arrow with him, expecting that the souls of these implements will survive, and be useful to him in the pleasant hunting-grounds of the future life. One of the

oldest records we possess of this strange burial-custom is given by Herodotus where he describes how the Scythians, on the death of a king, slew fifty young men, and as many picked horses, stuffed the bodies of all, and then, setting the youths on horseback, stood the ghastly troop in a circle around the grave. We could not understand this cruel custom did we not know that it was merely a dutiful way of insuring to his royal highness a ghostly retinue in the world of spirits suited to his exalted rank.

In the second stage objects are worshipped as the embodiments of spirits and souls of men. "The Polynesians believed a bird conveyed to an object (a stone) the spirit which was for the time to reside in it. The Dakota Indians painted a stone, and worshipped it, appealing to it as grandfather, to deliver them from their danger."

The final stage of fetich-worship, or that in which it begins to lose its purely fetich character, and blends with idolatry, appears in the practice of paying adoration to material things as embodiments, however inadequate, of high spiritual powers. The outward transmission from one to the other of these grades is indeed, as Mr. Tylor says, scarcely perceptible, and, in the case of idolatry in particular, is chiefly marked by some artistic or ornamental addition to the image for the purpose of giving it an importance suitable to its new rank. The worship of idols is quite properly regarded as marking a stage of social development out of barbarism into civilized life. It does not indicate an abrupt change, but a gradual transition, nor does it stand out isolated from fetichism, its antecedent form of worship. On the contrary, between the two there is no sharp boundary-line, as indeed might be naturally inferred from the fact that both are children of animism, and bear in their features and history distinct marks of their parentage. Both are also endeavors at a realization of the animistic theory, at constituting it a form of religious worship. The object worshipped is not the inanimate block of wood or stone, but the soul which it is supposed to possess, or the spirit which it is believed to contain. There is not, so far as we know, an example in all the world of a people worshipping the material substance out of which the idol is made. And hence the

dangerous and insidious nature of the practice. It is the deadliest foe of all religions, no matter how pure and spiritual they may be. It crept into Buddhism, a religion uncompromisingly opposed to it, yet actually becoming idolatrous in practice from permitting representations of Guatama Buddha.

In its very early stage the idol is connected with *manes*-worship. It is regarded as the abode of the ancestral spirit and is fashioned after the form assumed by it in its apparitions. Subsequently it is regarded as embodying some one of the spirits animating Nature; and, finally, the term *idol* is used to denote images inhabited by a deity. The idol, however, is but one of the many places where the supernatural manifests itself. It is not supposed under the necessity of abiding here, but has its exits and entrances at its own pleasure. At particular seasons this entrance was solicited by the priest, but, though there is nothing to indicate that the image was actually worshipped in the intervals of these divine manifestations, it was at least regarded with awe and reverence.

The early Christians, who also had their share of animistic belief, though they could not disprove the miraculous facts recorded of idols, would only acknowledge them as the work of demons. In all ages the number of those is legion who appeal to one wonder in proof or explanation of another. The last resource is the first resort, it is always so ready at hand, and it is also so much less troublesome to cry "Miracle!" than to make a patient inquiry into natural causes, or to get a knowledge of the peculiar and interesting little tendencies in human nature to wilful courses of deceit. Our modern spiritualists do but perpetuate the belief of the infant state of the human race in ascribing to spirit agency phenomena which seem difficult of explanation on any known natural law. So-called spirit manifestations are as old as animistic religion, and are particularly familiar to those inveterate ancestor-worshippers, the Chinese. What is more, they are occasioning in our own day disputes in regard to their causes somewhat similar to those which raged in former times in reference to the nature of idol miracles. Now, as then, the spiritualists are divided into two hostile camps, namely, spiritualists in the narrow sense, who declare rappings, mysterious writings, and table-turnings, to



be the work of *manes* or departed human souls, and spiritualists in the broad sense of supernaturalists, who, believing in the intervention of spirits in worldly affairs, credit all such puerile doings to the devil himself or his busy servants. Outside this field of contention stand the perplexed philosophers, searching intently for some little talismanic stone, in the shape possibly of an old force rehabilitated in a new and high-sounding name, which they fondly hope will quash the dispute by bringing the disputants face to face with a scientific reason. But, with the unaccountable short-sightedness which sometimes characterizes learned though crotchety men, they are happily blind to the fact that their new theory of psychic force, like the old theories of magnetic force, od-force, and what not, explain nothing—are, in fact, in need of explanation themselves—and only make the existing confusion, which in all conscience is great enough already, “worse confounded.” Happily, it is no part of our task to suggest a “theory” of spirit manifestations, our whole duty in the premises being performed in pointing out the relationship they bear to their common parent, the rude animism of primitive man.

At a certain stage in the development of the supernatural we can perceive ideas of rank and order emerging from the uniform spiritual notions of primitive times, and can follow them as they shape themselves into a system of celestial government modelled after the observed subordination in Nature or after the political growth of society. We commence with the conception of a soul or spirit in individual objects, as an hypothesis necessary at the time to explain the causes of natural phenomena. Spirits caused movement, sound, light and darkness, death and sickness, good and evil fortune, pain and pleasure. They were invented to explain all the phenomena of life, they were in fact what constituted life, and, as they were also held to inhabit inert matter, it necessarily followed that every thing in nature was “instinct with life” to the primitive mind, i. e., had a soul. “As the human body was held to live and act by virtue of its own inhabiting spirit soul, so the operations of the world seemed to be carried on by the influence of other spirits. And thus animism, starting as a philosophy of human life, extended and expanded itself until it became a

philosophy of nature at large.”<sup>1</sup> Mr. Tylor’s work is full of examples showing the general prevalence, at some time or other, of this stage of belief, of its influence on the conduct and customs of savages, and also of its survival through all intervening forms of religion to the present day. It was plainly a philosophy of causation invented to explain individual phenomena at a time when the laws of Nature were, so far as man’s knowledge of them was concerned, in the womb of an immeasurably distant future. But, not to repeat what we have already said on this part of the subject, capable though it be of much further expansion, we must hasten to trace the progress of religious conceptions into higher forms of belief and worship, as also to indicate, so far as space will permit, such circumstances as the modes of thought and life which guided or accompanied the transition. These higher forms of religious belief and worship are polytheism and monotheism, and the circumstances now alluded to are such as are known to mark the progress of society from savage and barbarous to civilized life.

The point of transition from animism to polytheism is, of course, not easily traceable, but it may be roughly estimated to correspond with that period of the savage mind in which, outgrowing its first simple theories of Nature, it rises from particular facts to general laws and observations, here striking the path of inductive reasoning, afterward destined to lead to results of such importance to mankind. The first step would probably be, ceasing to regard objects in their exclusive character as units. For example, all trees of the forest having certain qualities in common would be grouped together as a species, and at the same time the individual spirits of each tree would be subordinated to one comprehensive spirit of the group.

As the appetite for generalization is encouraged, there would be a further attempt at classing together all trees of a given place—as, say, trees of the forest—under the animating influence of one forest deity. Further than this the savage is precluded from going, through his want of knowledge of other lands than his own. The same process of generalization was repeated with animals, for instance, each species of which was

<sup>1</sup> Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, vol. ii., p. 169.

assigned its superintending spirit. The aborigines of North America and Australia believe in the existence of a common elder brother for each kind of animal, very large, very strong, and the archetype of its group. These considerations might well introduce us to the curious religious custom called *totemism*, had we either time or space to discuss it at present. Suffice it here to remark that they will not hunt or kill the animals of the kinds from which their *totems* are taken. Many amusing stories are told to illustrate the superstitious terror of the red men when, by accident, they have slain an animal of their totem kind. They have been known to humbly ask forgiveness of animals for having caused their death. "Beaver, my faith is lost; my totem is angry—I shall never be able to hunt any more," was the mournful salutation Mr. Long received from an Indian who had killed a bear. One thing, however, we must keep in mind while dwelling on this generalizing process. In all his reverence for the species deity, the savage never forgot the existence of the spirits and souls of particular objects. These were not supplanted. In time, indeed, belief in gods, who severally superintended the complicated operations of Nature, grew at the expense of primitive animism, and the local spirits sank to a subordinate position as servants of higher wills; still, they continued to form a large and by no means unimportant part of the religious assemblage of the period. The local spirits of fountains and rivers would be subordinated to a god of waters (perhaps of the sea), those of particular fires to one of fire in general, those of thunder and lightning to one of the sky, and so on in such other creations as gods of the homestead, of first-fruits, of love, and of marriage.

But, furthermore, some circumstance more or less peculiar to a country, as its geographical position, hygrometric condition, and climate in general, would serve to elevate one of these gods to a higher rank than all others in the minds of its inhabitants. Gradually all their hopes and fears would centre in this deity. His would be the greatest power, his works the mightiest works, his the most autocratic will of all the supernatural host. To him they would address their petitions in want and suffering, and him would they magnify above all



other gods. For example, the rain-god is most worshipped in the district of the Kol tribes of Bengal, where rain is unknown for long seasons, and much suffering prevails in consequence of famine and sickness. During this time of drought they address many petitions to this god, and toward its close they join in a pilgrimage to his holy shrine on the high hill *Marang Baru*. There, after uttering fervent prayers for saving rain, and depositing offerings of milk on the flat rock used for that purpose, they patiently await the appearance of the first cloud, and the rumblings of the distant thunder. Then, amid solemn strains of rejoicing, they return to their homes, well rewarded for their journey.

The effect of natural selection, if we may so call it, in giving predominance to a particular deity, is further illustrated in the special worship accorded to the water-god in certain localities. Continental savages, inhabiting inland tracts remote from great bodies of water, have no supreme deity of the watery element, though they have, as has been already observed, spirits of particular lakes, rivers, streams, and fountains. But islanders and dwellers on the sea-coasts have their great sea-god.

Now, what object in Nature is at once the most visible to man, the grandest in extent, the farthest away and yet the most familiar to his eye, the most varied, the most beautiful, next to his own body seemingly the most instinct with life? Is it not the heavens? And if, on contemplating the growth of a plant, the flow of a river, the poise of a rock, he hears a voice within him ask what makes the one grow, and the other flow, and the third stand balanced in its place, and he answers that these phenomena must be due to the presence of a living spirit in each object mentioned, how much more likely is he to have the same questionings as to what it is that makes the heavens so beautiful and so variable, at times so serenely blue, and again so thick and black, now bright with all the glowing colors of the spectrum, then cold like an arctic sea! Yes, truly, there is a Great Spirit in heaven, great as His abode is vast, exalted as His seat is high and mighty, for all the great features on Nature's canvas, the thunder and the lightning, the rain and the storm, the scorching heat and the stiffen-

ing cold, the hopeful dawn and the dewy eve, are His manifestations.

Belief in dualism can be traced back into savage life. It especially prevails among the Indians of North America. They hold that the world is ruled by two deities, one good, the other evil, both ever contending for the possession of men's souls here and hereafter. How much of this belief, in this mature shape, is the spontaneous growth of the uncivilized mind, or may have been imparted to it by Christian missionaries, is not always possible to say, and Mr. Tylor very properly cautions his readers against a too confident reception of such traditions as genuine and indigenous. But, with all due allowance for this possible source of error, it is still indisputable that primitive man had conceived and partly worked out the idea of a dualistic government of the world. The doctrine, indeed, would naturally spring out of primitive philosophy and experience. The philosophy of primitive man did not soar into high ethical regions. To him the good was no high ideal of attainment, but solely that which was pleasing to his senses or favorable to his interests. Similarly, he only knew that to be evil which pained his senses or hurt his worldly prospects. The former would come from a good spirit, and the latter from an evil. Subsequent realization of *moral* good and evil, and the problem of the origin of the latter, would both confirm for a time this early belief, and contribute to its diffusion. Subsequently moral good and evil would be regarded as of more moment than their physical analogues, whence it would follow that the sphere of action of good and evil spirits, removed from the material world—now surrendered to the undisputed sway of natural law—would be relegated to the moral world, where they still reign supreme. A remarkable myth, embodying the doctrine of dualism, and outlining its meaning, is given in Mr. Tylor's work.<sup>1</sup> It is the accepted myth of the Tuscarora Indians of North America, and runs as follows: A pregnant woman sank from the upper to the lower world. She alighted on a tortoise, having some earth on its back, and it grew into an island. The mother gave birth to twin-boys, and then died. They grew up, one becoming good

<sup>1</sup> Primitive Culture, vol. ii., p. 291.

(good spirit), the other bad (bad spirit). The good spirit wished to create light, but the evil one opposed him, wanting to keep the world in darkness. The good spirit prevailed, however. He made a sun out of his mother's head, and a moon out of a piece of her body. He made creeks, rivers, beasts, and fishes. But the bad spirit was always working against him, trying to do men harm.

The fear of evil being so much more keenly felt among mankind than the love of good, it is not so very surprising that the evil spirit should more than the good receive their homage and service, even to exacting the greater share of their prayers and sacrifices. Demon-worship reaches its culminating point, perhaps, in the religious system of the Izedis, or devil-worshippers of Mesopotamia, whose humble prayer is, "Will not Satan reward the poor Izedis, who alone have never spoken ill of him, and have suffered so much for him?"—an abject petition, truly, considering the object to which it is addressed; one expressing, more forcibly than any comments we might add, the absolute degradation to which a worship of fear is capable of sinking the human mind.

It is not our intention to claim for prehistoric man that he constructed out of his religious consciousness, or his needs and experiences, single or combined, a mental image of the Creator such as has been accorded to us by revelation. Such a task is, so far as we have any certain means of judging, unattainable by his unaided powers. Sages and poets, it is true, have seemed in moments of religious exaltation to touch the secret of the heavens, and what little they imparted to mankind of the mystery was joyfully welcomed, carefully preserved, and patiently meditated. But, notwithstanding what has been said to the contrary, we do not see grounds for believing that the masses could ever have attained to faith in the true God without a revelation. Into the profound question of this revelation, its how, its when, and its where, we do not propose to enter. Suffice it for this task if we have succeeded in showing how—

"through the ages an increasing purpose runs,  
And the thoughts of men are widened by the process of the suns."



We may now briefly sum up the progress of the idea of a Supreme Deity. In all times man has diligently pursued the search for a cause. At first satisfied with accounting, however arbitrarily, for phenomena as they separately arose, he rested for a season ; but afterward observing that, instead of happening in a capricious and disconnected manner, they ranked themselves in a fixed and uniform order, he sought for the law or principle according to which this order was framed. Now, starting from the premises that single phenomena are occasioned by the presence of spirits, and reasoning out the solution of the wherefore of the more complex operations, he would arrive at the conclusion that they stood for coördinating powers who could be nothing less than greater spirits, of whose *dicta* the local spirits were the mere executors. Finally, observing the same order in the relations of the groups, he rose to the conception of a Supreme Spirit, who, through his deities of groups and his local spirits, guided the complicated operations of Nature.

The growth of the foregoing conception would bear relation to the development of the social and political orders. The earliest stage of primitive society, if it yet deserves such a name, as consisting of many loose, incoherent bodies of savages where personal freedom was paramount and political or social duties were unknown, would correspond with pure animism. The next stage of development into communities, having the individual subordinate in some respects to the society or tribe, would correspond roughly to the origin of polytheism ; and the final stage of savage, or it may be now barbarian life, in which several tribes, welded together in one body politic, acknowledged the supremacy of one chief, would see the origin of the idea of a Supreme Spirit.

The revelation of God to man has not supplanted the idea of a Supreme Spirit as thus developed, any more than the dissemination of religious truth has put to flight the hosts of demons, elves, and fairies, with which imagination has peopled the universe from the dawn of human reason. The two images live on side by side, blended so intimately in popular faith that they appear one in origin, in nature, and in their claims upon belief.

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